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ABSTRACT

Issues related to the use of academic English by foreign students in the United States are discussed, and two college programs are presented as examples of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) preparatory programs available to these students. The programs are the American Language Program at Columbia University (New York) and the ESL Program at City College (New York). Various issues facing program developers and ESL teachers are also discussed: the debate over instruction in general- versus specific-purpose academic English; use of standardized language tests to determine linguistic preparedness for academic study; and the screening and training needs resulting from the increasing use of limited-English-speaking international students as teaching assistants. Finally, the implications for university faculty of students undertaking academic study in a non-native language are also explored. (MSE)

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Academia, English and the International Student

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Academia, English and the International Student

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Abstract

After surveying the current state of international study in general and the case of international students studying in the U.S.A. in particular, this article focuses on issues related to the use of English for academic purposes by these numerous non-native speaking students. The American Language Program at Columbia University and the ESL Program at New York's City College are described to exemplify two possible types of ESL preparatory programs available to international students.

Various issues facing program developers and teachers of English to speakers of other languages are also reviewed. These are the general-purposes versus specific-purposes debate related to preparation in English for academic purposes, the question of standardized assessment tools like the TOEFL examination used to determine linguistic preparedness for academic study, and the screening and training needs produced by the increasing use of international teaching assistants whose first language is not English. Finally, the implications for university faculty of students undertaking academic study in a non-native language are also explored.

Academia, English and the International Student

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, student mobility has become an ever increasing worldwide phenomenon. According to UNESCO statistics, in 1987 there were 1,127,387 university students studying away from their home countries. Of these, approximately 40% were studying in Europe and 34% in North America. In the United States, visa-holding international students make up 3% of the total university enrollment.[1] The total international student population in the U.S. for 1990-91 came to 407,529, of which 45% were studying at the graduate level. Apart from some leveling-off in the 1980's, the international student population has grown steadily since 1954-55 when it amounted to only 34,232 or 1.4% of the total U.S. university population at that time.[2]

Students from Asia represent 56% of the international population. From this region, China contributes the largest number of students, followed by Japan, Taiwan, India and Korea. The next most important regions of origin for international students in the U.S. are Europe and Latin America. The most popular field of study for these students is business and management, with engineering in second place. The Northeast region hosts more foreign students than any other area in the U.S., followed by the Midwest, Southern, and Pacific regions. Schools such as the New Jersey Institute of Technology and MIT have international student populations which amount to 22% of their total enrollment.[3]

For the majority of these international students, English is

not their first language, an important linguistic reality the U.S. university community must face. This becomes even more challenging when we add in the uncounted number of resident immigrant, naturalized and Puerto Rican students whose first language is not English and who arrive at the university with limited proficiency. In Cummins' discussion of the language skills necessary for academic success, he distinguishes between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP).[4] He goes on to observe that immigrant students can usually master face-to-face communication skills in a matter of two years, yet it can take them from five to seven years to approach grade-level norms in second language academic skills.[5] Performing academic tasks in a second language is far more demanding than simply communicating conversationally and requires complex kinds of linguistic knowledge and abilities in order to communicate efficiently in this specialized discourse field. The task is compounded even more when we factor in all the educational-culture knowledge which is also necessary to function successfully in a U.S. educational institution.

It has largely fallen to members of the TESOL profession, that is, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, to prepare these students linguistically and facilitate their transition into a new learning environment in which English will be their language of study. As a member of this profession, I have identified several aspects related to this process which I

would like to touch on, however briefly, in this essay. They are:

1) The kinds of programs which exist to prepare ESL learners for academic endeavors,
2) Issues which currently concern the developers of these programs,
3) Problems with the measurement of a learner's preparedness for academic study,
4) The "problem" concerning international teaching assistants, and
5) The need to assist students who are non-native speakers of English to function effectively in the academic courses they are taking.

Programs for Non-Native Speaking Students in English for Academic Purposes

The Institute for International Education reports that in 1990-91 15,572 students were enrolled in intensive English programs associated with universities and 19,663 in independent language programs, totaling 35,235 international ESL students. These figures are based on the enrollment records of 392 different language programs across the country. [6] One of the primary roles of all such programs is to prepare their students linguistically for pursuing academic studies in institutions of higher education.

There is no standardization in the approaches taken by these

various programs, so it might be best to simply describe two of them to exemplify some of the possible kinds of curricula that are available. I will cite the examples of Columbia University's American Language Program (ALP), one of the pioneers in this field, and City College's ESL program, one of the more innovative.

The ALP can be characterized by the alliteration: theme, team and academe. All focus on language is carried out within the context of a chosen theme, courses are team taught, and the goal is preparation in academic English. This is an eight-level program with gradated subdivisions which moves from a concentration on oral English toward the development of academic writing skills. Students study sixteen hours a week and also take two hours of audio laboratory and one hour each of video and reading laboratory. Maximum class size is eighteen. On a weekly basis, the two or three-member teaching team plans multimodal activities working with the various competencies in the context of the current theme. Most learning materials are prepared by the teaching team.

Each class's curriculum develops in response to student needs, progress and interests. More advanced students are offered supplementary electives from a changing menu of content-based or skill-based short courses. Field experiences and group activities outside the classroom are also an important part of the curriculum as is attendance at periodic lectures offered for the program by Columbia faculty members.

Initial placement is based on an internally developed written examination. Passing from level to level is based on teacher recommendations. Students in the advanced levels can begin to take some courses in certain departments at Columbia. Students may also take a preparatory course for the TOEFL examination, a standardized test usually required of international students for admission to U.S. universities. The ALP serves a clientele composed mainly of international students intending to enter undergraduate or graduate programs somewhere in the U.S. if not at Columbia itself. Currently, the program attracts approximately 300 students per semester, of which about 70% are Asian and most of the rest European.

The clientele of City College's ESL program, approximately 800 students per semester, is quite different in that the great majority of these students are permanent residents of the U.S. About a third are Haitian, another third Latin American, and the remaining third Asian, all representative of recent immigration patterns to the U.S. Immigrant students who have been in the U.S. for more than five years and who don't pass the college's English examination are assigned to a developmental English program offered by the English department. If students needing further English are more recent arrivals, they are directed to the ESL program.

This fourteen-hour per week program, created by Betsy Rorschach and Adele MacGowan, adopts a Whole Language philosophy. It is divided in three semester-long levels: Fluency, Clarity and

Correctness. The name of each level identifies the principal communication goal at that stage in the learner's development. The first level, Fluency, is primarily a reading and writing course. Nine hours a week are dedicated to these activities plus one hour of writing tutorial. There are also three hours of oral work with one of laboratory. During the semester, students read four to five books such as *Growing Up, The Diary of Ann Frank, Karate Kid, Rebecca, The Godfather*, or an Agatha Christie mystery. Then they produce a fifty-page piece of writing which may be an autobiography, a mystery or a science fiction story. At this level communicating *meaning* is primary and grammar is not formally addressed, although group editing of writing is done.

The Clarity level follows much the same format, except that students now produce a fifty-page research paper on some aspect of American history, society or culture and make an oral presentation based on their projects. As the level's name suggests, emphasis is now put on achieving optimum clarity in the exposition of ideas and content. The Correctness level is similar, but reading, research and writing are all carried out in the area of anthropology. Now, work on polishing the formal aspects of language and careful editing of written work are highlighted. At each level students keep reading logs, do free writing, meet in groups and collaborate to revise and edit their work. Some sections have one hour a week of computer laboratory or correspond with pen pals through e-mail. Different from the ALP, the ESL courses at City College carry credit and students

can take other college courses from the very beginning. Passing to a higher level is based on class performance and the quality of the student's writing portfolio. To graduate from City College, however, all ESL students must eventually pass skills assessment and proficiency tests in English. [7]

Current Debates in Preparatory Programs

As in the case of program types, the issues debated by the TESOL profession with respect to academic preparation are many and varied. Once more a specific example might be the best way to transmit the flavor of the debate. One issue of concern to developers of English for academic purposes (EAP) programs is how generic or specific a focus the curriculum should take. Some would argue that programs should be directed at helping learners develop general oral and written communication skills along the lines of Cummins' BICS. They argue that this general communication base must first be strong and include generic principles. For example, in the area of writing this would include basic concepts of inquiry and rhetoric, with emphasis on writing from sources. [8] Then, in combination with transferable cognitive academic skills from the first language and culture, the learner will be able to adapt and specialize these generic skills him- or herself once confronted by the specific academic context where it is necessary. In any case, they would argue, it would be more appropriate for actual specialists in the different academic disciplines to introduce their students to the peculiarities of the field's rhetorical style rather than

expecting an English teacher to be familiar with a host of discipline specific discourse styles.

Accepting that this view may be appropriate when preparing undergraduate students for probable academic tasks, Canseco and Byrd, however, suggest that "ESL courses might have different responsibilities toward their graduate students than toward their undergraduate students."[9] They argue that graduate students need to have developed the ability to interpret and respond to discipline-specific topics provided by instructors. Foreign graduate students must learn to write *impersonal* expository prose based on the selection and presentation of appropriate evidence. Supporters of this position are reacting against the highly *personalized* nature and structuring of writing often produced through the "process approach" advocated by Zamel and others.[10] Further, they would point out that "finding one's voice" or "being oneself" as students being led through the process approach to writing are often exhorted to do, is really a very culture-specific rhetorical form that has no reality outside our particular cultural context and discourse community.[11] It, therefore, might be more appropriate to introduce graduate students directly into the discourse community and rhetorical peculiarities of their specific area of study. Horowitz argues that, "By placing writing practice squarely in academic contexts, EAP teachers can insure the maximum transferability of the skills they teach."[12]

Measuring Preparedness for Academic Study

Another issue being debated in the field is the adequacy of the ubiquitous Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination as an instrument to evaluate students' linguistic preparedness for academic study. Researchers in this area warn that:

> Despite increased international student populations and heightened interest in the topic, there is little unequivocal evidence regarding the relationship between international students' scores on the [TOEFL] and their academic success. This is due at least in part to the complexity of the concept of language proficiency and in part to the difficulty of measuring the variety of English language skills necessary for academic success.[13]

Light, Xu and Mossop found that the TOEFL score was not an effective predictor of academic success as measured by GPA, in part because a number of students in their sample were successful academically although they had not attained the usual cutoff score of 550 used for graduate admissions.[14] If fact, those with scores below 550, on the average, obtained higher GPAs than students with scores between 550-559. Their conclusion was that "TOEFL does not measure all communicative skills that are important for successful academic functioning...(and that) variables other than language proficiency are important for international students' academic success."[15]

It must be mentioned, however, that there is also serious research which supports the validity of the TOEFL and other traditional English proficiency tests (see Graham, 1987). Graham suggests that there is a minimal level of English proficiency

required before other factors assume more importance in determining academic success at any given institution. The point to be remembered is that, "the relationship between English proficiency and academic success is complex and unclear and that language scores should not therefore play a disproportionate role in admissions decisions."[16]

Another objection related to the TOEFL and to the Test of Written English (TWE) has been raised by Ann Raimes.[17] Among a number of the concerns she mentions, Raimes warns of the proliferation of coaching and test-specific instructional materials being used around the world to prepare students for these exams. Such coaching can and does lead to artificially high results and, when these scores are used in isolation for placement decisions, this can yield unfortunate consequences for students and faculty alike as they discover that, in spite of their high scores, students do not have sufficient English mastery to function in the academic setting in which they have been placed.

The International Teaching Assistant "Problem"

A final issue which I would like to raise is that of the international teaching assistants or ITAs. Simply put, as international students come to represent a higher proportion of the graduate student population in the U.S., more international students are receiving teaching fellowships. The so-called "problem" arises as they take on their undergraduate teaching responsibilities. ITAs often experience communication breakdown

because students do not understand them because of their pronunciation or intonation patterns or they themselves do not understand undergraduates speaking to them in fast, colloquial English. Such linguistic problems are compounded by the fact that the set of assumptions about the goals of education and teacher/student roles which guides the ITA's behavior often does not correspond to that held by their students or American colleagues. This difficulty in interpersonal communication has become a fullfledged "problem" due to complaints from undergraduates about having to study under people they claim they cannot understand or who conduct their classes in what they find to be strange ways.

All of this has led to a new sub-discipline within the ESL field. A number of people in our profession have become interested in developing ways of screening and/or training potential ITAs to avoid the kinds of uncomfortable situations which have arisen in the past. Facing a predicament similar to that posed by the TOEFL as an instrument for prediction of academic success, Yule and Hoffman report the results of a study which showed that relatively high TOEFL scores (570+) do not by themselves guarantee that the individuals selected as ITAs on the basis of their TOEFL scores will be able to convert their general linguistic ability into a capability to effectively present instructional material in spoken English.

Yule and Hoffman conclude that:

> If U.S. universities intend to continue recruiting the brightest and best of the world's international

> graduate students to support university teaching and research missions, they should plan to provide more extended periods of adjustment and ESL training for a substantial proportion of those students.[18]

For such training to be successful, Rounds suggests that the ITA trainee needs much more than a general ESL course. The training course and its materials should be based on a specific-purpose approach which, in turn, is grounded in analysis of the classroom discourse patterns typical of the specific academic area in which the ITA will teach.[19] In the general context of U.S. education, Rounds characterizes successful classroom discourse as that which:

> ...emerges from the teacher's ability to develop an atmosphere of cooperative interaction and consensus -- a sense of working together to achieve a common goal. Such discourse includes a clear articulation of what that goal is and when and to what extent it has been achieved. Furthermore, it arises from an appreciation, elicited by both linguistic and nonlinguistic means, of where students stand in relation to their achievement of that goal.[20]

This is an aspect of U.S. educational culture which not even all native-born American faculty members have successfully mastered.

Implications for U.S. Faculty

If nothing else, I hope that by going over the issues I have covered, it has become clearer that the tasks of linguistic and cultural learning and adaptation that every non-native speaker of English faces as a student or faculty member in the U.S. university system are enormous. Simply successfully completing an ESL preparatory program or passing a placement or proficiency test does not mean the non-native speaker is 100% ready to enter academic competition on an equal footing with native speakers.

The linguistic and cultural learning process will continue throughout the student's academic career.

We as faculty working with these students must be sensitive in assessing just where our international students are in this two-pronged process. We must temper our demands on students to the point in development they have achieved, and we must be ready to offer guidance, strategies and support to encourage further development. Even more importantly, we must recognize that our own view of education is a cultural artifact. We value it highly and have based our lives on it, but it is not God-given. We must strive to understand and respect other epistemologies and approaches to learning just as we must strive to help international students understand our own system so they can learn successfully within it.

A final aspect of the international student's experience we must try to understand is one which perhaps can only be appreciated if we have lived it ourselves. Here I refer to the tremendously difficult challenge of trying to restructure one's very intellectual fiber into another linguistic system, in this case English, and achieve any kind of real communication of one's intellectual being to members of another culture. This is what is required of the international student. It is simply amazing that so many people have been as persistent and successful as they have been in meeting this challenge. We must do all we can to be sensitive to and supportive of their struggle.

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